

6.2 Dilemmas of an East Asian immigration country: Japan

Due to its strong economy and its ageing population, Japan urgently needs migrant workers. However, concerns about ethnic homogeneity and national identity have proved important obstacles to planned immigration policies. The Japanese government has sought to resolve the contradiction by admitting migrant workers through the 'side doors' of trainee recruitment and admission of persons of Japanese origins, or the 'back door' of irregular employment. Yet it is impossible for a democratic polity with a strong civil society to prevent some settlement of immigrants and to ignore their social and cultural needs once present. Pressures for change are building up.

Japan has been experiencing severe labour shortages since the mid-1980s. At first women were admitted, mainly from the Philippines and Thailand, to work as dancers, waitresses and hostesses. They were followed by men from these countries as well as from Pakistan and Bangladesh, who worked - generally illegally - as factory or construction workers. The foreign population of Japan increased from 817 000 in 1983 to 2 million in 2005 (OECD, 2007: 349). About 39 per cent are permanent residents (MOJ, 2006), mainly descendants of Koreans, who were recruited (sometimes by force) as workers before and during the Second World War. In 2005 there were 599 000 Koreans. Other main groups, mainly resulting from more recent labour migration, were Chinese (520 000), Brazilians (302 000), Filipinos (187 000) and Peruvians (58 000) (OECD, 2007).

The Japanese government is opposed to immigration, due to its concern to preserve ethnic homogeneity. In 1989, revisions to the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act introduced severe penalties for illegal foreign workers, brokers and employers. However, recruitment of unskilled foreigners of Japanese origin was permitted, leading to a scramble to recruit *Nikkeijin* (descendants of former Japanese emigrants) from Brazil and Peru. Other 'side doors' to Japan include recruitment of 'trainees' from developing countries, and employment of foreigners registered as students of Japanese language schools, who are permitted to work 20 hours per week. Trainees often work long hours for about US\$15 000 a year, compared with the minimum wage of US\$28 000. They may be fired or deported if they complain (Migration News, 2007). Unlike Korea, Japan is reinforcing the trainee

system (Skeldon, 2006: 287). The 'back door' of irregular labour migration appears to have been tolerated for a long time by the Japanese authorities, and reached a peak of 285 000 in 1995 (OECD, 1997). However, in recent years the government has introduced a range of control measures, and the official estimate of overstayers in Japan fell to 193 000 in January 2006. Refugee policy is also extremely restrictive, with only 231 persons admitted on humanitarian grounds in 2005 (OECD, 2007: 258).

Immigrants make up only 1.6 per cent of Japan's population of 126 million. However, low birth rates and population ageing make it likely that immigration will grow in future. Well-educated young Japanese are unwilling to take factory jobs. Government policy encourages investment in new technology to raise labour productivity, while many companies shift labour-intensive workplaces to low-wage countries. But there are limits to these approaches: it is hard to relocate construction and services jobs, and many factory jobs, such as making car components, are part of complex supply chains which cannot easily be divided geographically. A topical issue is the lack of care workers to look after Japan's growing elderly population. The government is encouraging companies to develop robots capable of such tasks as lifting elderly people in and out of bed, but they may be seen as a poor substitute for a Thai or Filipina domestic worker. In any case, as the *Financial Times* points out, no robot would make a suitable wife, and marriage migration is on the increase (Pilling and Hille, 2007).

The key question is whether settlement is taking place. Research shows that immigrant workers are heavily concentrated in certain sectors or occupations, causing structural dependence (Mori, 1997: 155). Differing employment patterns are linked to varying legal status: regular workers (especially *Nikkeijin*) find jobs in large enterprises, while irregular workers are mainly in small enterprises or informal-sector jobs. A study of Asian newcomers in the Shinjuku and Ikebukuro districts of Tokyo found some long-term settlement, as well as intermarriage with Japanese (Okuda, 2000). A study of *Nikkeijin* in Toyota City found high levels of concentration in certain apartment blocks, and frequent isolation from the Japanese population. Conflicts arose around issues of daily life such as rubbish disposal, noise and traffic offences (Tsuzuki, 2000). Komai (1995) found tendencies to international marriages, family formation, residential concentration and the building of ethnic communities.

Ethnic places of worship, businesses, associations and media were beginning to emerge.

Another significant trend is the gradually improving - though still weak - situation of immigrants with regard to civil, political and social rights (Kondo, 2001). Long-standing residents, mainly of Korean origin, may remain non-citizens even into the third or fourth generation due to restrictive naturalization laws (Esman, 1994). However, legal changes in 1992 led to a gradual rise in naturalizations: from 6794 in 1990 to 16 120 in 1999 (of whom 10 059 were Koreans) (OECD, 2001: 337). In 2005, 15 251 foreigners acquired Japanese citizenship – just 0.8 per cent of the foreign population (OECD, 2007; 259). Mori (1997: 189-206) found that public authorities were gradually including foreign residents - even irregular workers - in health, education and welfare services. Social integration programmes have been introduced, including employment service centres for foreign workers and education for children of foreign nationals on equal terms with native Japanese (OECD, 1998: 131). Many voluntary associations have been set up to work for improved rights for immigrants.

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